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ABSTRACT

An analysis of the development of communication media can yield insight into the evolution of literary criticism. M. H. Abrams' division of the history of literary criticism into the imitative, the pragmatic, the expressive, and the objective provides a guideline in analyzing corresponding developments in communication media. The evolution of communication media can be traced from the oral culture to the manuscript stage and on to the print stage and beyond. Each stage has had a distinct impact upon literary critical theory. (CH)

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The Development of Literary Criticism:

A Media Perspective

by

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The Development of Literary Criticism: A Media Perspective

In a lecture at the State University of Iowa in 1935 Max Forster explicated what he termed "The Psychological Basis of Literary Periods."[1] The essay consisted of a criticism of sociological theories for the evolution from the period of Rationalism to the "new Romantic feeling in the eighteenth century", and a defense of the thesis that "psychological reasons must be at the bottom of the different periods of art." In a similar vein Walter J. Ong has focused on the psychological impact of communication media on developments in rhetorical and pedagogical theory.[2] This paper is a preliminary attempt to extend Forster's analytical viewpoint to the historical development of literary criticism.

I make no brief for a single or major cause of the developments discussed; far too many other cultural phenomena may influence the formation of critical emphases. At most, the evolution of communication media will be treated as a condition necessary, but not sufficient, for the development of new critical perspectices. Above all, I hope to add a helpful dimension to the understanding of literary theory. Perhaps, through a media perspective, the history of literary criticism may assume the appearance of a logical trend.

M. H. Abrams offers a useful historical framework for this analytical viewpoint.[3] In his outline of the history of literary

criticism, Abrams divides it into four successive stages. He finds the bases for these schools in the four co-ordinates of art criticism: the universe, the audience, the artist, and the work. These theoretical focal points are, respectively, the mimetic, the pragmatic, the expressive, and the objective.

According to Abrams, the mimetic are those theories which view literature as "essentially an imitation of the universe." They posit that "the historical genesis of art is traced to the natural human instinct for imitating, and to the natural tendency to find pleasure in seeing imitations."[4] Among these critics are Aristotle (who dealt most extensively with tragedy as "the imitation of man in action"), Plato (for whom poetry was an imperfect imitation of "Forms"), and Plotinus (who rendered Plato's "transcendental ideal" and "empirical ideal" by conceiving of "Forms" as residing in nature).[5]

The pragmatic school views literature as "something made in order to effect requisite responses in its readers." Of those critics who focused on the audience co-ordinate, the more prominent are Sir Philip Sidney (for whom the moral effect of poetry was the terminal aim), Alexander Pope (who, like John Dryden, endeavored to discover rules which would aid the poet in pleasing the audience), and Samuel Johnson (who concerned himself, among other things, with Shakespeare's "moral purpose").[6]

Expressive theories see the primary source and subject matter of a poem as "the attributes and actions of the poet's mind."[7]

"The paramount cause of poetry is not, as in Aristotle, a formal cause, determined primarily by the human actions and qualities imitated; nor, as in neo-classic criticism, a final cause, the effect intended upon the audience; but, instead, an efficient cause—the impulse within the poet of feelings and desires seeking expression, or the compulsion of the 'creative' imagination . . . which has its internal source of motion."[8] Abrams credits Wordsworth ("Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings") with the first full elaboration of this literary perspective. Other expressive-critics include Shelley, Coleridge (whose poet is more artist than "genius"), and Mill ("All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy"). Abrams' exposition of the "changing metaphors of the mind" illustrates quite clearly the evolution from the mimetic mirror to the expressive (illuminating) lamp, which gives him his title.[9]

The objective critics suggest that we "deal with the poem qua poem, independently of extrinsic factors."[10] "The emphasis in French pedagogy on the method of explication de text . . . focused attention on the study of the poem as such and developed methods for analyzing the internal relations of its elements." Since 1930, among the kinds of statements most widely endorsed have been those of Eliot (we must consider poetry "primarily as poetry and not another thing"), Ransom (the first law of criticism "is that it shall be objective, shall cite the nature of the object" and shall recognize "the autonomy of the work itself as existing

for its own sake"), and Wimsatt ("neither the qualities of the author's mind nor the effects of a poem upon a reader's mind should be confused with the moral quality of the meaning expressed by the poem itself").[11]

I

Of the theories which writing brought into being, why did the mimetic occur first? Perhaps because the term "imitation" so aptly describes the literary experience of the oral culture. Late in the fifth century Greece witnessed the decline of rhapsodic education and the ascendance of the sophist.[12] But the sophist's inheritance of the educational apparatus did not alter a fundamentally mimetic emphasis. The entire process of creating, disseminating, and assimilating literature had been thoroughly dominated by the oral medium and remained so for centuries.[13] And this process was at all three levels imitative.[14]

Consider first the art of oral composition—the act of creation. It is difficult for the "eye-minded" to imagine a process of composition which does not entail the reflective jotting down of one's ideas on some form of manuscript and reviewing the product to make corrections. The oral poet, nevertheless, could have no conception of such a procedure. Because he must fluently extemporize his literary product, the oral singer could not afford the luxury of (nor did he have at his disposal) the reviewable copy. He could focus only on relatively short units

of thought and consequently engaged in paratactical arrangement.[15] He had on immediate recall a storehouse of prearranged, formulaic expressions which he could mold into any desired exposition—a method similar to the early Greek orators' use of commonplaces.[16] Ong offers a more detailed explanation: "Oral composition is essentially 'rhapsody' (Greek 'rhapsoidia'), that is, a stitching together, in the original meaning of this term as applied by the Greeks to their epic song. The epic singer is not a memorizer in our post-Gutenberg sense of the word, but a skilled collector. He works unavoidably with a deep sense of tradition, which preserves the essential meaning of stories. But he has no fixed text to reproduce, such as we take for granted in a typographic culture. Instead, he possesses an armory consisting of formulas or metrically maleable phrases, and of themes or situations; the banquet, the messenger, the demand for surrender . . . and so on."[17] This process was imitative in light of the educational theory which preserved it. "The young poet learns from some older singer not simply the general style of poetry, but the whole formulaic diction. This he does by hearing and remembering many poems, until the diction becomes for him a habitual mode of poetic thought."[18] Originality was, therefore, an irrelevant concept to the practitioners of oral composition and went largely unnoticed. The creative process was, for the oral poet, "<u>reflex</u>ive not <u>reflect</u>ive," responsive to tradition, rather than original.[19] Hence, proficiency in the oral composition of poetry demanded imitation.

On the second level, dissemination, it should be readily apparent that the training in delivery of oral literature was grounded in mimesis. Harriott reminds us that "most of the oral poet's instruction comes through copying his master."[20] But why was the audience's reception, or assimilation, of the oral tradition imitative as well? Because the audience was constantly engaged in the attempt to facilitate memory of what was said, there was a tendency to imitate subvocally the rendition of the rhapsode. In his chapter entitled "Mimesis" Havelock describes the captivating effect of Greek poetry: "This, then, is the master clue to Plato's choice of the word 'mimesis' to describe the poetic experience. It focuses initially not on the artist's creative act but on his power to make his audience identify almost pathologically and certainly sympathetically with what he is saying."[21] This explanation is reinforced by one of McLuhan's theories: "Hypnosis depends on the principle of isolating one sense in order to anesthetize the others. The result is a break in the ratio among the senses, a kind of loss of identity. Tribal, nonliterate man, living under the intense stress of auditory organization of all experience, is, as it were, entranced."[22] It was, incidentally, to awaken Greece from its entranced state that Plato directed his writing talents. Precisely because poetic experience was, for the Greek audience, so profoundly mimetic, Plato felt compelled to unleash his intellectual wrath against the poet.[23]

One should hardly be surprised, then, that "the most primitive

aesthetic theory"[24] postulated that literature's method and aim was imitation. It merely described literature as it was in its predominantly oral phase.

II

What encouraged the literary critic to next stress the impact of literature on the audience and vice versa? Ong provides a clue when he hints that "before printing matured, the reader himself is more in evidence."[25] Because script writing made reading silently no more efficient than reading orally,[26] reading, during the Medieval period, was "necessarily reading aloud."[27] In The Gutenberg Galaxy, McLuhan explains in greater detail: "An 'inner direction' depends upon a 'fixed point of view.' A stable, consistent character is one with an unwavering outlook, an almost hypnotized visual stance, as it were. Manuscripts were altogether too slow and uneven a matter to provide either a fixed point of view or the habit of gliding steadily on single planes of thought and information."[28] Leclercq rounds out the development of this thesis when he remarks that medieval (oral) reading was "an activity which, like chant and writing, required the participation of the whole body and the whole mind."[29] In other words, the oral reading event has its emphasis on the author's audience—the interpreter. The oral reader's physical and emotional investment constitutes his unique contribution to the literary experience and elevates his status as receiver.

Not only does the act of oral reading focus attention toward the reader; so does the act of composition. Chaytor informs us:

> To savour the finer points of literary style, to appreciate the exact choice of words, and even the logical sequence of ideas, we require to reread the matter presented to us. But it was not to a reading public that the medieval writer appealed. . . . No one could leave a recitation with a comfortable consciousness that he could read it all in print in the next day's newspaper; if its intention were not grasped upon the spot, it was gone forever. Hence the distinction of styles, in the medieval sense of the term, and the analysis of figures of speech and ornaments of rhetoric was important to an extent which cannot now be readily realized, for the technique of the speaker or reciter of his own works is not and cannot be that of the writer who proposes to approach his public in cold print.[30]

In other words, the author of the manuscript work was much more aware of the demands of the oral audience than was the print writer of his silent reading public.

With the exception of Longinus' treatment of the author's genius, there is little, if any, attention devoted to the author's role prior to the Romantic period.[31] Recalling the function that memory served in the literary experience of earlier periods we

need not wonder long why the reader lost consciousness of the writer. As Putnam reasons:

> Such an extraordinary development of the power of memory, making it almost a distinct faculty from that which the present generation knows under the name, may properly be credited with some influence on the slowness of the growth among the ancients of any idea of property in an intellectual production. As long as men could carry their libraries in their heads, and when they desired to entertain themselves with a work of literature, needing only to think it to themselves . . . instead of being under the necessity of reading it to themselves, they could hardly have the feeling that comes to the modern reader . . . of an indebtedness to the author, an indebtedness which is in large part connected with the actual use of the copy of the work.[32]

Another factor which may have led early critics to ignore the author was that authorship was by no means a unique occupation. Trask suggests that in highly oral societies "anyone and everyone" are, in a sense, authors.[33] For example, in the Greece that Aristotle was born into oral recitation was a nearly universal occupation. Being that such recitation entailed impromptu refinements in composition, the authorship could be termed a collective one. Not until manuscripts became more widely distributed did individual writers insist upon due credit. And even then their efforts

were largely to no avail.[34]

III

The attention of the Romantic literary critic shifted to the author, first, because of the higher premium print afforded authorship. The mass reproduction of typography placed the author's name in greater circulation.[35] Print also allowed the author to serve as a kind of "mass proxy" who stood in experientially for the rest of mankind.[36] But more important, print, in the Romantic world of expanding literacy, enabled the author to more fully manifest his individual creativity. The idea of "fixity" (i.e., the fixed text) shifted the emphasis from the interpreter's re-creativity to the "original" author's creativity. Ong elucidates: "In this stylistic, with its conscious questing for the novel, romanticism was moved to reject the cliche formalism of an old knowledge storage and retrieval system and to rely instead on chirographic and typographic storage. When truths needed no longer be constantly reiterated orally in order to remain available, virtuosity, that is, superlative skill in manipulating well-worked material, was replaced by 'creativity' as an ideal."[37] But print not only enabled the author to lay aside the formulaic diction; it also allowed the readership to notice originality. As Chaytor stated: "Not until the invention of printing had begun to stabilize orthography and grammar was it possible for the author and a reader to recognize that personal touch which is the basis

of an individual style."[38]

A second possible influence for this focus upon the author is the fact that reading was now silent. The natural isolation of the purely visual reader makes utterance much more individual. "With writing, the word becomes something that can be privately assimilated; no person other than the reader need be there, only the book."[39] But just as the audience has now become decollectivized, so has the authorship. "The reader of print stands in an utterly different relation to the writer from the reader of manuscript. Print gradually made reading aloud pointless, and accelerated the act of reading till the reader could feel 'in the hands of' his author."[40] Or as McLuhan elsewhere relates: "The too obvious character of exact repeatability that is inherent in typography misses the literary man. He attaches little significance to this merely technological feature and concentrates on the 'content,' as if he were listening to the author."[41] And Ong adds that "poetry, which in an oral culture had been identified with actual oral performance, for Mill has become soliloquy."[42]

Finally, what media-related factors can possibly help account for the objective criticism? Since it is such a comparatively recent phenomenon contextualism is nearly impossible to analyze in the context of the media perspective. McLuhan has concluded, perhaps justifiably, that we need to progress safely beyond the influence of the particular medium we wish to study before we can attempt to interpret its approximate impact. Nevertheless, a

partial explanation may be possible. Perhaps the lexicon is symbolic of the necessary cause. As print culture became more predominantly literate the notion that meanings could be standardized and recorded in books became steadily more popular. Hence meaning could be derived from a careful analysis of the text alone. Perhaps the silent reading of the printed page and the attendant tendency to view the literary work as an isolated object helps to explain this literary perspective as well. Whatever the causes, we might surmise that at least one is media-related.

This brings us to the current period—McLuhan's so-called "electronic era." Whether or not literary critics will soon join the rest of us in the "tribal world" remains to be seen. If radio and television will have any effect on the way the critic views the literary work, we might suspect that the effect will not be noticed soon. Despite the fact that "none of us—no matter how knowledgeable we are of the influence of the media—can avoid its effects,"[43] no radical shift of the sensorium can be expected to make itself known until long after its hypnotic effect has waned. For this reason, a media analysis of the historical development of literary criticism must remain the product of hindsight.

Footnotes

[1]Essay printed in Nathaniel M. Caffee and Thomas A. Kirby, eds., Studies for William A. Read (University, La.: Louisiana State University Press, 1940), pp. 254-68.

[2]See The Presence of the Word (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), ch. 1; Ramus, Method and the Decay of Dialogue (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958); and Rhetoric, Romance and Technology (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1971).

[3]The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1958), pp. 3-29.

[4]Ibid., pp. 3-14.

[5]Ibid., pp. 30-46.

[6]Ibid., pp. 14-21.

[7]Ibid., pp. 21-26.

[8]Ibid., p. 22.

[9]Ibid., pp. 57-69.

[10]Ibid., pp. 26-29.

[11]M. H. Abrams, "Theories of Poetry," in Alex Preminger, ed., Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 646-7.

[12]Theodor Gomperz, Greek Thinkers (1901 rpt., New York: The Humanities Press, 1955), I, p. 412.

[13]The sudden burst of literacy in the late fifth century did not cause more than a gradual transformation from oral to written modes of literary activity. See Adam Parry, "Have We Homer's Iliad?", 20 Yale Classical Studies (1966) 214-5 and James Notopoulos, "The Introduction of the Alphabet into Oral Societies," 4 Society of Macedonian Studies (1953) 516-24.

[14]See Eric A. Havelock, Preface to Plato (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 20-35.

[15]James A. Notopoulos, "Parataxis in Homer: A New Approach to Homeric Literary Criticism," 80 Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association (1949), 1-23; and Alfred and Maurice Croiset, An Abridged History of Greek Literature (1904 rpt., New York: AMS Press, 1970), pp. 14, 17.

[16]George Kennedy, The Art of Persuasion in Greece (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 53.

[17]Rhetoric . ., pp. 34-35.

[18]Milman Parry, "Studies in the Epic Technique of Oral Verse-Making," 43 Harvard Studies in Classical Philology (1932), pp. 8-9.

[19]Roger D. Abrahams and George Foss, Anglo-Saxon American Folksong Style (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1968), pp. 9-10.

[20]Rosemary Harriott, Poetry and Criticism Before Plato (London: Methuen, 1969), ch. 1.

[21]Havelock, p. 45.

[22]Marshall McLuhan, The Gutenberg Galaxy (New York: The New American Library, 1969), p. 35.

[23]Havelock, pt. 1.

[24]Supra n. 3, p. 8.

[25]Ong, Ramus . ., p. 313.

[26]Denys Hay, "Fiat Lux," in John Carter and Percy H. Muir, eds., Printing and the Mind of Man (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), p. xix; and J. B. Bessinger, "Oral to Written: Some Implications of the Anglo-Saxon Transition," in Marshall McLuhan, Verbi-Voci-Visual Explorations (New York: Something Else Press, 1967), p. 11.

[27]Marshall McLuhan, "The Effect of the Printed Book on Language in the Sixteenth Century," in Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan, eds., Explorations in Communication (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), p. 126.

[28]P. 39.

[29]Dom Jean Leclercq, The Love for Learning and the Desire for God (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), p. 19.

[30]H. J. Chaytor, From Script to Print (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1966), p. 55.

[31]Frederick A. G. Beck, Greek Education: 450-350 B. C. (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1964), p. 46; Croiset, p. 15; E. P. Goldschmidt, Medieval Texts and Their First Appearance in Print (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1943), p. 116; and Rudolf Hirsch, Printing, Selling and Reading: 1450-1550 (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1967), pp. 7-8.

[32]George Haven Putnam, Authors and Their Publics in Ancient Times (1893 rpt., New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1967), p. 107.

[33]Willard R. Trask, ed., The Unwritten Song (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1966), I, p. xiii.

[34] Harriott, loc. cit.

[35]Hay, p. xxx; and Hirsch, p. 8.

[36]Donald R. Gordon, The New Literacy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), p. 99.

[37]Ong, Rhetoric . ., p. 294.

[38]Chaytor, p. 82.

[39]Ong, In the Human Grain (New York: MacMillan Co., 1967), p. 4. Ong elsewhere (Ramus . ., p. 313) describes the book as a container which one must look into in order to appreciate its contents—thus accounting for the inward, submerged, and relatively passive participation in the work of another. See also S. H. Butcher, Some Aspects of Greek Genius (1891 rpt., Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1969), p. 167.

[40]Gutenberg . ., p. 153.

[41]Ibid., p. 98.

[42]Rhetoric . ., p. 19.

[43]James J. Murphy, "The Metarhetorics of Plato, Augustine, and McLuhan: A Pointing Essay," 4 Philosophy & Rhetoric (1971), 210.